

**Understanding mature
consumers' perspective
on food and the factors
driving purchase decisions**



Abstract

Varsity is constantly researching and analyzing the mature market's perceptions of food, the role it plays in well-being and its impact on quality of life. Substantive qualitative research has yielded the following seven themes:

Five key themes emerged from the research:

- What's Missing Is What Counts
- Doing Lunch, Not Making It
- Freedom in a Pill
- Cooking Up a Crowd
- Simplicity Rules
- Color Cues
- Surfing for Recipes

We gained insight on the role food plays in the lives of consumers ages 60-75.

We learned about the impact of schedules on eating occasions, the motivating factors for cooking at home as well as those for dining out, and how this generation identifies healthy food.

In addition, we gained a deeper understanding of seniors' grocery shopping practices and the factors that influence purchase decisions. We learned their perspective on branded products, how they use recipes and the sources they rely on most for information about food.

Methodology

Varsity conducted a focus group May 19, 2010 to uncover both perspectives on and preferences in food. The group was made up of 10 individuals, three men, seven

women, ages 60-75. All live at home; nine live in households with one other adult and one lives alone.

KEY FOOD THEMES

We identified seven key themes that presented themselves in our research.

WHAT'S MISSING IS WHAT COUNTS

Mature consumers are identifying “healthy” foods by what has been reduced or eliminated, not necessarily the ingredients actually contained in them. Physicians have stressed the dangers of certain ingredients, manufacturers have responded with changes to their product portfolios, and mature consumers are taking it all in. Preference is overwhelming for items labeled “low sodium,” “low cholesterol,” “low sugar” and “no trans fat.”

*– “I’m much more aware of sodium content these days. Almost everything has too much. You have to read labels and look for low sodium.”
- Frank*

DOING LUNCH, NOT MAKING IT

Household schedules change significantly with retirement. Housewives are adjusting their routines to accommodate the husband who’s suddenly hanging around the house

during the day—but they’re not giving up all of the “me” time they’d grown accustomed to during their husbands’ working years.

All of the married women described a willingness to alter the morning and evening schedules by making breakfast later and in some cases, making dinner earlier. The married women still report doing a significant portion of the cooking, cleaning and other household chores, but they are also still holding to the lunch routines they established when their husbands worked outside the home.

For housewives, lunch became a time for socialization with girlfriends and relaxation. They could get their husbands off to work, get some housework done and then escape to lunch with the ladies. They became accustomed to dining out and being waited on for a change. Lunch, for these women, was and remains a midday oasis of sorts.

– “I don’t make lunch, I DO lunch!” - Diane

FREEDOM IN A PILL

A significant portion of time was spent discussing whether and how the aging process has affected food preferences and eating habits. While some reported eating smaller meals and avoiding spicy or creamy dishes, the majority of participants were unwilling to change their diets simply because they've gotten older. They want to try new things and refuse to have their choices restricted by indigestion or other nuisances.

In the context of food, the mature consumers will not be denied and refuse to settle. They have found that Zantac enables them to eat as they choose. For them, it's freedom in a pill.

– "I eat what I want—I just take the pill ahead of time and I'm ready to go!" - Maggie

COOKING UP A CROWD

Seniors are cooking less and dining out more as retired, empty-nesters. They don't need as much food on a daily basis, and don't enjoy cooking for two as much as they like cooking for a crowd. It was more important to prepare elaborate meals for their children as they were growing up, for togetherness, nourishment and nutrition.

It is with togetherness in mind that many seniors are deciding to cook big meals once again. They have learned that spreading word of a special dinner will bring their extended family together. The menu dictates attendance, so serving everyone's favorite is the surest way to spend time with the whole family. These food-centered gatherings usually take place on Saturday or Sunday.

For most retired empty-nesters, cooking is utilitarian on a daily basis. However, they have seized the opportunity to turn the preparation of food into a social activity, a way to lure the family back home—at least for one night.

– "I'll ask my wife to cook if we haven't seen the grandkids in a while. If she makes something everyone likes, we could wind up with twenty people at our house on Saturday night." - John

SIMPLICITY RULES

When seniors do prepare food for themselves at home, they are making simpler meals than they did when their children were at home. They feel an obligation to cook and still express a desire to make authentic, from-scratch meals—but without a fuss. They want their food, and their work in the kitchen, to be less involved, so they're seeking out easy-to-make recipes that require fewer pots and pans. Many report preparing more casseroles and one-dish meals while relying on manufacturers for those simple recipes.

Often, meals prepared by seniors don't include homemade dessert. Most seniors are baking only for special occasions, avoiding it on a regular basis. They recognize the yield of most recipes to be excessive unless feeding a large group, and they decide against baking to avoid over eating.

– "I've been there, done that. I made fancy meals for years. I'm making simpler meals now, and I don't feel bad about it! But I do feel like I've failed if I don't make dinner." - Mimi

COLOR CUES

Mature consumers profess loyalty to and preference for certain branded products, spanning all categories. Many, however, are more familiar with the labeling and packaging than the actual brand name of their favorite product. All described being confused and frustrated when shopping for products that have a significantly different look from the one they're expecting; it makes them question their selection and wonder if the product is the one they're seeking.

For canned items, label color is the most impactful cue. Even the most familiar product has the potential to become foreign to seniors if the label colors change significantly.

– *"I forget the name of the tomato sauce I like, but I know the label is red and yellow! I look for those colors." - Gloria*

SURFING FOR RECIPES

Mature consumers are utilizing Internet recipe resources with a frequency that approaches exclusivity. They use these sites to locate recipes for ingredients they have on hand and to customize the recipe, most often by reducing the serving yield.

This audience finds websites such as allrecipes.com appealing because of the ability to tailor search options, seeking those with desired ingredients while eliminating those that contain any that might be unwanted. The ability to recalculate the recipe for increased or decreased yield is also very appealing to mature consumers. When seeking out new recipes, they admit to relying, in part, on the ratings of other users. Seniors also describe using search engines like google.com to seek out recipes by main ingredient. They appreciate the volume of recipe options produced by a broad search.

– *"We like to use allrecipes.com. It's fun to see how other people rate the recipes. It makes a difference in what we choose to cook." - Jim*

OVERVIEW

Mature consumers are refusing to sacrifice. They're prioritizing "me" time by "doing lunch," and they're finding ways to eat what they want with a little prescriptive help. They're savvy and frequent users of the Internet, relying on web-based resources for information about food and cooking.

They are still cooking; the meals they prepare for themselves on a daily basis are simpler than those they made when their children were at home. Seniors are still making those

expansive meals but are using them as special occasions to lure the children and their families back home.

Packaging and labeling are increasingly important to mature consumers. They rely on familiar colors and labels to provide reference and context when grocery shopping. They expect those labels to call out what's been reduced or eliminated from the product, thereby making healthy choices easy and obvious.

OPPORTUNITIES

Understanding of the mature consumer's perspective on food is essential for manufacturers, marketers, retailers and foodservice operators alike - although the opportunities for each differ substantially. To learn about the major opportunities we've identified for each segment as well as Varsity capabilities, please contact:

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